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ABSTRACT

A renewed interest in traditional religious beliefs and values has been noted on college campuses. As part of a series on the role of religion in the lives of university students and to assess student beliefs about the nature of God and determine the way in which such beliefs were held, 254 college freshmen were surveyed. Students were categorized into one of four religious orientations: (1) extrinsic, in which religion is subordinated to self-needs; (2) intrinsic, in which religious attitudes help to determine behavior; (3) indiscriminately pro-religious, in which religion serves an all-encompassing role in meeting self-needs; and (4) indiscriminately anti-religious in which religion is rejected. Most students endorsed traditional concepts of God. Students classified as intrinsic in religious orientation were more traditional than students classified as extrinsic in religious orientation and did not believe that a person had only his/her own resources to call upon for assistance. Many students classified as indiscriminately anti-religious believed in a personal God or Supreme Being. More anti-religious students (22%) than those classified in other orientations believed that a person has only his/her own resources to call on. More students classified as extrinsic believed in spiritual forces outside of the individuals, although most affirmed traditional concepts. (Author/JAC)

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RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION AND THE CONCEPTS OF GOD HELD BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Research Report # 7-81

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A renewed interest in traditional religious beliefs and values has been evident on college and university campuses across the nation. A recent National on Campus Report (1980) suggested that students on some campuses were increasingly turning to conservative evangelical groups, while on other campuses, students were seeking involvement in traditional religious organizations. Most such students were reportedly seeking to explore their religious faith through Bible study and worship.

The present study was undertaken as part of a series of studies on the role of religion in the life of students at a large metropolitan university. The purpose of this study was to assess student beliefs about the nature of God and to determine the way in which such beliefs were held.

Student Beliefs About the Concept of God

In his review of research on the religious beliefs and practices of college students, Parker (1971) found that beliefs about God were varied, depending on the population sampled. He concluded, however, that about half the students studied believed in a personal God. The research also suggests denominational differences, i.e., a higher percentage of Catholics believed in a personal God than did Jewish students. In a more recent study, Hasting and Hoge (1976) reported changes in the beliefs held by college men regarding the "nature of the Deity." In 1974 they reported that 12% affirmed a Deity as "an infinitely wise, omnipotent Creator," and 23% affirmed an "infinitely intelligent and friendly Being,", the only two options related to a traditional concept of a "personal God."

A study of freshmen entering in 1973, conducted at the University of Maryland by Ambrose and Sedlacek (1973), found that 31% believed in a "personal

God who answers prayer," 32% in a "Supreme Being," 11% in a "spirit of life," 13% that there are "Spiritual forces outside of man," and 11% that "a person has only his/her own resources to fall back on."

Religious Orientation

The concept of religious orientation conceived by Allport (1963; Allport and Ross, 1967), and developed by numerous others (Wilson, 1960; Feagin, 1964; Hood, 1970, 1971; King and Hunt, 1969) was chosen to provide a framework for understanding how beliefs about God were held by college students. Four religious orientations were defined as follows: (1) Extrinsic religious orientation is an instrumental, utilitarian perspective in which religion is subordinated to the needs of the self; (2) intrinsic religious orientation is a perspective in which religious attitudes serve to undergird and determine personal behavior; (3) indiscriminately pro-religious orientation is one in which religion serves as an all-encompassing role in meeting the needs of the self without regard to contradictions that may exist between these needs and religious precepts; and (4) indiscriminately anti-religious orientation is one in which religion is rejected as a way to meet the needs of self or to guide personal behavior.

Method

A questionnaire concerning religious orientation and concept of God was administered to a random sample of 254 entering freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park. Most students were 17 or 18 years of age (42% and 56%, respectively); 49% were male 51% were female; 87% were white, 8% black, and 5% other races. Religious preferences were 34% Catholic, 25% Protestant, 21% Jewish, 4% "other", and 16% "none." Most students (87%) preferred the religious tradition in which they had been reared (Knight and Sedlacek, 1981).

The questionnaire included the Intrinsic-Extrinsic (I-E) scale developed by Feagin to measure religious orientation, and students were grouped into categories of religious orientation using the median split method recommended by Hood (1970). Students were also asked to indicate their current religious preference, the religion in which they were reared, and their concept of God.

Results

Most students endorsed traditional concepts of God: 45% believed in a "personal God," 27% believed in a "Supreme Being," 11% believed that a person has "only his/her own resources to call on," 10% believed that "there are spiritual forces outside of man," and 7% believed in a "spirit of life."

Significant differences (Chi square at .01) were found among the four religious orientations on the concept of God (Table 1). Students classified as intrinsic in religious orientation were most traditional in their beliefs about God: 64% believed in a personal God, and 26% believed in a Supreme Being. None of these intrinsic students believed that a person had only his/her own resources to call on.

Many students classified as indiscriminately anti-religious believed in a personal God or believed in a Supreme Being (38% and 20%, respectively). However, more anti-religious (22%) students than those with other orientations believed that a person has only his/her own resources to call on.

While most students classified as extrinsic also affirmed traditional concepts of God (35% believed in a personal God, 35% believed in a Supreme Being), more students in this category than in the others believed that there are spiritual forces outside of man (19%).

Pro-religious students tended to be close to the mean of all the other groups, although they were most discrepant in their belief in a Supreme Being (33%) and belief that a person has only one's own resources to call on (3%).

Discussion

The difference among religous orientations suggested a relationship between the concept of God held by college students and the way religion functioned in their lives. Students scoring high on the extrinsic scale used religion to provide security, status and social opportunities. In a similar fashion, their concept of God reflected a need for sources of support outside themselves, particularly those students who believed there are "spiritual forces outside of man." Students with an intrinsic orientation not only affirmed traditional pietistic religion and gave it a superordinate role in their lives, but that pietism was reflected in their concept of God as "personal" or as a "Supreme Being." The belief that a person has only his/her own resources to call on was particularly inconsistent with the primary role that religion held for these students.

The concepts held by students classified as indiscriminately anti-religious were particularly interesting. More of these students believed that a person had "only his/her own resources to call on" than students in other orientations, and this was consistent with their disavow of religious precepts. However, a majority of these anti-religious students affirmed traditional concepts of God. Students with an anti-religious orientation seemed somewhat selective rather than indiscriminate in what they would take from religion.

There are several ways that results of this study might be utilized by counselors and student personnel workers. First, a workshop for student affairs staff, particularly for counselors and chaplains, could be organized around the results. The purpose of the workshop would be to improve the sophistication of those working with students in utilizing religious data and concepts. Second, the

results of this study could be used in planning other studies, including other implications of religious orientation in student life, a longitudinal study of changes in religious orientation and values, and an intercampus study of religious orientation. Third, a program exploring the implications for student retention , a combined research and service program, could be implemented.

These and other ideas are being considered to positively affect the lives of students at the University of Maryland based on a consideration of religious variables.

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Table 1.

RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION BY GOD CONCEPT*

God Concept	Religious Orientation				
	Pro-Religious	Extrinsic	Intrinsic	Anti-Religious	Total
I believe in a personal God	49%	35%	64%	38%	45%
I believe in a Supreme Being	33%	35%	26%	20%	27%
I believe a person has only his/her own resources to call on	3%	8%	0%	22%	11%
I believe that there are spiritual forces outside of man	8%	19%	2%	12%	10%
I believe in a spirit of life	6%	3%	7%	8%	7%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%**

*Differences significant using chi square at .01

** Columns or rows may not add to 100% due to rounding